"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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LAND REFORM
A Christian Challenge

By I. W. Moomaw*

A Christian farmer in India once led me into his little cottage to hear him read what he called "the song of the land." He could not read, but he took the Bible from a teakwood stool and asked me to follow the page while he quoted. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof," he began. Then he completed the Twenty-fourth Psalm, weighing each word as he spoke. As he repeated the first verse he said, "That is about us and our fields."

He had three little fields, seven acres in all. A foresighted missionary helped him with a loan to buy the first one nearly thirty years ago. He said, "The land is our life; our four children were reared from it." One of them was a minister, one daughter a trained nurse, another married to a nearby farmer, and the younger son was with his father. "As my strength fails Soma takes up the plow," he said.

"It is a cycle of life," I replied.

"No," he said, "land is God's arm providing for man." Then, as if speaking for all the peasant farmers of Asia, he said, "Who could live without land?"

Around the world man's dependence upon land is reflected in the beliefs and folklore of the people. Mohammedans speak of "golden land" as they refer to special fields which tradition says were given to their more valiant forefathers by Allahhimself. Egyptians like to be known as "sons of the black earth." The Indians of the High Andes still nourish the hope of recovering their land that was taken from their ancestors at the time of the Spanish invasion. A young missionary was once preaching to a company of Indians about the second coming of Christ. One man asked, "When that time comes, will we get our land back?"

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A Troubled World Conscience

Living in the midst of abundant land and crop surpluses, it is hard for us to comprehend man's critical and naked dependence upon land. The thin blanket of topsoil spread over the small productive portion of the earth provides our only hope of survival. Deprived of the privilege of sowing and reaping for a period of fifteen months, the human race would face disaster. Agriculture differs from other occupations in that wide space is required for plant growth. Agriculturists of Europe and parts of Asia give careful study to the amount of land space required for different kinds of plants. I once spoke with a Japanese farmer while he pruned leaves from his persimmon trees. He said, "I prune for two reasons. Take off enough leaves to admit sunlight to the plants under the tree; leave on enough leaves to mature the fruit on the tree." Land is a unique form of property. It is a gift of nature, and although man can by effort increase the present volume of arable land, limits are set by various strictures of nature--the ultimate one being the fact that the total quantity of land is fixed.

Land is a major concern to over a billion people in the world today. As population mounts, the fierce struggle for land begins, as men vie with each other to get little plots to cultivate. It would be a serious error to underestimate the importance of land as a factor in the revolutionary movements sweeping much of our world.

For the first time in history the world began to face its man-land problems seriously when the United Nations Conference on National Resources was convened in August 1949, with 520 delegates present from forty-seven different countries. The Commission on Land and Land Tenure drew by far the largest proportion of delegates. At the opening session Mr. Trygve Lie declared, "The areas of acute distress are no longer local problems. Our presence here records our acceptance of them as world issues."

The Land Situation

Briefly, what is the land situation of Asia? The Indian Famine Commission has calculated that 1.5 acres of cropland per person are needed in order to provide a reasonable minimum diet. But what do we find? Japan has only .3 acre per person. The people there are now trying to survive with 25% less food than was their meager lot before World War II.

Korea has .5 acre of cropland per person. Even before the recent tragedy there, the Korean people with only 1,470 calories per person were the most poorly fed in the whole family of nations. India and China each have .7 acre of cropland per person. Egypt, a country often overlooked, has .4 acre. Farming in Egypt has been frozen to the pattern of 3,000 years ago, but the land tenure situation is deteriorating. Most of the country is desert, while the processes of erosion ever narrow the valley of the Nile. Seventy percent of the people are farmers, with a population density of 1,700 per square mile of cultivated land.

This shortage of land in agrarian countries places tenants and laborers at a serious disadvantage. The landlord can play one tenant against the other until rents are bid up to a point which leaves only the barest margin of survival In some parts of India it has been customary, since 1930, for tenants to pay half the land tax in addition to the customary amount of rent. A special fee, or extra portion of the crop, must be paid for grazing the narrow strip of land at

the edge of the fields.

In other areas, such as the United States, Africa, and parts of Latin America, there is still an ample supply of land, but minority groups often do not have access to it on reasonable tenure arrangements. Sharecropping, peonage, and like systems of tenure which dwarf personality are steadily coming under the scrutiny of an awakened world conscience. To work out more equitable relationships among people in the use of land promises to be one of our most urgent tasks during the years immediately ahead.

Tenure Classes

In general there are four classes of people on the basis of access to land:

(1) Those who hold land primarily as a privileged class. The city farmer, the absentee landlord, the moneylender of Asia, and the speculator in land are typical of this group. This becomes a vicious evil in densely-populated areas where families experience difficulty in getting land for homes. There are also those who hold large tracts for hunting or private parks.

(2) Those who are family farmers, owning the land and farming it as a means of earning a living. Jefferson no doubt had these people in mind when he declared, "It is our purpose that the cultivator shall own the land he tills." The stability of any government and the strength of its institutions depend in a large measure upon the number of people in this class. The story of Korea might be quite different today if that country had been spared the social and political drain of a feudalistic land system.

(3) Those who farm land owned by others and pay for its use under one or more of the different systems for renting.

Tenancy may have many values depending in part upon the relative power of the landland and tenant in the system. There are farmers who prefer operating larger farms of good land to small farms of poorer land which they might be able to own. It is also a good starting place for younger farmers.

(4) The peasant laborer, the wage hand, or the peon, whose only tenure in land is the privilege to work on it for wages. Millions in Asia, and our own army of migrant laborers who trek from crop to crop, are members of this tragic group. Seldom can they see any hope of having land to cultivate for themselves.

The countries most subject to political revolution and agrarian unrest are often those having a strong landed class on the one hand and a landless class on the other. In one Latin American country where revolution in government is common, ninety-four per cent of the people own no land. Forty per cent of the land is held by three per cent of the people. Communist agitators take advantage of this unrest as they promise free land to their followers.

The mere re-distribution of land itself is not land reform. Done ruthlessly it can even create new problems as dangerous as those it seeks to amend. Just and constructive land reform must be viewed not as an economic expedient but as an ongoing ethical and moral process. In a dynamic society it is fallacious to assume that the land question can be settled once for all.

While there must be a central core of policy, there is need for sensitive adjustment from time to time to meet changing social and economic contingencies. As Brooks Hays, Congressman from Arkansas, has observed, "'Social opinion should always be in advance of law and the greater or less happiness of the people depends upon the narrowness of the gulf between them.' (Sir Henry Maine) The Christian's interest in land is, therefore, centered less in legal concepts than the moral principles which underlie them."*

Guideposts of Land Reform Policy

The urgency of land reform in a world struggling to become one community makes it essential that we formulate guideposts of land policy having more or less world-wide validity. Some of these would be:

(1) Wide distribution of land among those needing it for cultivation, with adequate freedom in its use, and ownership by the tiller as the goal.

(2) Reasonable assurance of continued occupancy on the part of those who rent land.

(3) Discouragement of absentee ownership, landlordism, and nonsocial uses of land. (This should not discriminate against the just rights of widows, elderly people, or other cases of valid need.)

(4) Equitable division of returns from land in proportion to the respective contributions of both landlord and tenant. The tenant must be safeguarded against rack-renting (the demand of rent so great as to cause severe physical and mental distress).

(5) Recognition of both individual rights and valid social or community rights. Farming and rental practices should safeguard the fertility of the soil.

(6) Curbing speculation in land and the exploitation of weak or disadvantaged groups by moral sanction and by law.

(7) A graduated land tax and inheritance laws to guard against too large estates on the one hand and too small or uneconomical holdings on the other.

(8) Sensitive regard for the needs and capacities of underprivileged groups and those of limited financial means in the allocation of land.

(9) Provision for experiments in the cooperative cultivation of land or other appropriate forms of land allocation in densely-populated areas.

(10) Concern for all groups but actuated by a desire to create conditions so that all people can lead a better life and develop a true sense of social responsibility.

(11) Recognition of the moral and religious implications of land use, wholesome family living, and stable community life as the goal of land policy.

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* Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin, No. 68, page 1.

Some Tension Areas

Land tenure is the weakest link in the social and political chain of many countries in the world. The dislocations of World War II and the advance of communism have helped to highlight tension areas in much of Asia. In zones of population density, where the best possible man-land adjustment should prevail, we too often find a feudalistic land system. For years millions have been ground between two millstones. At the top there is a landowning class living from land rents and usury. At the bottom is a crop-weary soil, capable only of low and uncertain yields. Recently a missionary in The Philippines warned against rents that were taking up to seventy per cent of the crops, and usurious interest rates of one hundred per cent. "What can we expect from the people when they seem to have all to gain and so little to lose by revolt," he said. "The Communist promise of quick access to land is almost irresistible."

The Bell Report on Land Tenure in The Philippines observes, "Land is the most important source of wealth in The Philippines and its concentration or distribution is the primary factor that affects the social and economic well-being of the people.... Large profits enjoyed at various times by the landowner class have gone into the acquisition of more land. The result is that land ownership by farmers who work the land has steadily declined. Land values have risen so much that tenants have little or no chance whatever of owning equities in the land they farm."*

An editorial in the Manila Bulletin for December 19, 1950, says, "Land reform came too late in China but it is still not too late elsewhere in Asia, in the opinion of some of our top thinkers.... It is being tried successfully in Formosa and in Japan under military occupation." A program of land reform has been carried forward in Japan by the Military Government with the result that tenancy in some areas has decreased from fifty-five to fifteen per cent. The tenure problem there has not been solved by any means. The average farm has only 2.5 acres and the new owners are often hard pressed for equipment and methods to operate them economically. Much education in the responsibilities of land ownership will be needed, and necessary adjustments must be made before we can say that lasting tenure reform has been achieved. But a beginning has been made and the people are pleased.

The new government in India has probably undertaken the most far-reaching program of land reform to be found anywhere in the world. Only a few months after India received her independence nearly 60,000 peasants appeared in Lucknow pressing their claims for land. Assured by the new government that land reform was high on the priority list, they agreed to go home and wait. To revamp the land system of so vast a country as India, with over eighty per cent of the people illiterate, is a formidable task. It will require a long time, but notable beginnings have been made on four parts of the program:

(1) To abolish the 150-year-old "zamindari" (landlord) system and make land available to peasants in tracts ranging in size from six and one-half to thirty acres.

(2) To limit the rate of rent paid by tenants to one-fourth of the crop in case of irrigated lands and one-third crop for other lands. Year-to-year leasing is to be discarded in favor of long-term leases. The ten-year lease is favored.

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*Report of the Economic Survey Mission to The Philippines, page 55.

(3) To invest authority in the village for the local administration of land.

(4) To provide for experiments in cooperative farming, especially for new lands being brought under cultivation, where power equipment is to be owned jointly by farmers. In several of the more densely-populated areas of small scattered holdings there are to be efforts to test out the possibility of joint use of power equipment and joint cultivation.

Land reform is more than an economic problem. It is a moral and a religious problem as well. It cannot be precipitated by revolution or by legislation alone. When the fires of revolution die down, the old causes still remain The Old Testament is replete with warnings about man's duty to his neighbor and to God in the use of land. It was unthinkable that a family should be alienated from its inherent rights in the land. As a divinely-created resource, land shoul be a testing ground for Christian action and conduct. Dean Liberty Hyde Bailey declares, "One does not act rightly toward one's fellows if one does not act rightly toward the earth."* Land was created as a means of life and as a home for the human family. Its rightful use, therefore, becomes a matter of moral con cern which faces Christians squarely.

Foreign Missions and Land Reform

At the heart of foreign missions is the fact that their work is largely among the dispossessed peoples of the earth who own very little or no land. To establish a church and to rear Christian families the people must experience at least some of the stability and security which land can provide.

By its very nature, land reform is a government responsibility. Missions can educate their members to the interrelations of Christianity and politics so that influence may be exerted by them for responsible use of government power. There is also much that Christian missions can do through first-hand contacts with village people. Limited by lack of resources, the chief value of missionary effort lies often in local projects of a pilot or experimental nature such as the following.

Khergaum Christian Cooperative Society, India

Twenty-two years ago sixteen men, including village farmers, Christian teachers, a carpenter and a tailor, formed the Khergaum Christian Cooperative Credit Society in India. The village pastor led in prayer at an initial meeting and read Paul's familiar words, "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ." The society has sought to carry out these words within a two-fold purpose:

1. To provide a means whereby people can help each other socially, economically, and religiously.

2. To establish families on land.

The society was to be a "poor man's bank" whereby members would lend money to each other for worthy causes at moderate rates of interest. A little over Rs. 300 was accumulated from the purchase of shares by charter members and

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* Liberty Hyde Bailey, The Holy Earth, page 2.

a loan of Rs. 1200 was received from the Church of the Brethren to provide operating capital. Taking advantage of sound counsel, the society has had a steady growth during the years. According to a recent report, the membership has increased to 129. Of the membership, 64 are village farmers and 65 are teachers, craftsmen, and others. Operating on a small mutual self-help scale, loans were made during the last five years as follows:

To buy land	Rupees 11,021
To pay old debts	8,349
To buy work oxen	4,776
To build homes	3,278
For education	1,337
To buy farm implements	1,151
To build wells	555
For clothing and food	337

Since the beginning, members have been able to secure a total of over 184 acres of land, purchase 165 head of cattle, and build or remodel 92 homes. However meaningful these figures are when translated in better home and family living, the real achievement is the stable community of Christian families and the village church of 520 members. While this is only a local effort, it would be hard to overestimate the leavening value of mutual self-help given in a spirit of Christian concern.

Land Settlement in The Philippines

In parts of The Philippines there are still government lands available for settlement and colonization. To take advantage of such lands a farmer would need financial resources to grow the first crops, build a house, and maintain his family for a year. This would rule out most of the families who are in greatest need of the land. Here too cooperative credit, whereby people are joined as "all for one and one for all," has proven itself to be a useful tool. Missionaries, such as Allen Huber and Cornelio Ferrer of the Rural Church Department, have gone all out to promote, organize, and guide cooperative credit societies on sound lines. In the face of communism and pending agrarian revolution, these men and their colleagues believe that "the Filipino peasants will give their loyalty to those who share and who care most." As in other missionary efforts, the limiting factors are a reasonable amount of working funds and qualified personnel.

Help for "Staircase" Farmers

High in the Andes of Ecuador the United Andean Mission has been formed for a special work among the Indians. Now in their fourth year of operation, the missionaries--an agriculturist and a Christian education man--are studying plans for helping peons to get established on land of their own. At Guatajata, Bolivia, the Canadian Baptist Mission during the years has aided over seventy Indian families in establishing farm homes of their own. Today their well-kept fields and neatly-painted houses and interest in church, school, and community stand out in happy contrast to the serfdom from which they have arisen. The success of this and similar homestead projects has helped to stimulate government interest in colonization on a broader scale.

The Incas of old had their own unique system of land tenure at the time of the Spanish conquests. Some of their sturdily-constructed land terraces

still stand as a memorial to their great rural culture. But today a feeling of despair and bitterness characterizes the Indians who are peons on what were the "great staircase lands" of their proud ancestors. The experiences of missionaries working among the Indians of the Andes indicate that land is the most effective key to their hearts. Efforts to communicate the Christian gospel will get much further if missionaries seek to meet in tangible ways the Indians' inborn hunger for land.

In China solid groundwork was laid by the careful research of J. Lossi Buck and others from the College of Agriculture and Forestry at the University o Nanking. Their research on land utilization in China was no doubt one of the mo comprehensive studies ever made in Asia. It provided the basic information esse tial to carrying out a program of land reform, but the necessary action by gover ment came after the breakdown of the Nationalist government was already irretrie ably underway.

What of the Future?

Most of the people among whom missionaries serve are in the throes of land reform. The people are on the move, but this does not necessarily mean that they will move forward. The problems of land reform will no longer wait; they will be solved in one way or another. What we see among the underprivilege peoples of the world today is in one sense not revolution. As they press their legitimate claims for land and a greater degree of social and economic justice, they are really asking for a place in the democratic household of free nations

What has been done so far through rural missions is pitiably small when compared with our Christian imperative so clearly calling for a righteous stewardship of the land. All land is the handiwork of God, and we serve him or dishonor him by the use we make of it. We need a much larger number of rural missionaries who are qualified, both technically and religiously, to do the kind of job that Christians ought to be doing in lands where events of history are moving so rapidly. In a letter just at hand Dr. E. M. Clark, a veteran rural missionary to Japan, pleads, "The distribution of land is nearly over, but in the achievement of land reform there is a long way to go. We need personnel and resources to open a Christian rural service and training center in each of the four hundred odd counties of Japan, so that qualified Christian leaders are near at hand to help to lift and strengthen life on the land." With village people dependent upon what happens to the land, the Church in its rural world mission faces one of the great challenges of its history.

The Church and Land Tenure in the United States

In appointing a special committee on land tenure in the year 1940, the Town and Country Committee and the Home Missions Council of North America declar the growing interest of the churches in rural people and the land. While our land system in the United States does have its unique values, there are trends today of special interest and concern to churchmen. Certain questions arise:

(1) Do we really have a land policy?

We have generally assumed that wide distribution of land ownership among cultivators is desirable. We have legislation which favors family farm holdings, like the Preemption Act, 1841; the Homestead Act, 1862; and the Bankhead Jones Act of 1937. But a look at certain trends leaves some room for doubt

as to how closely we are following the Jeffersonian concept that "ownership of land shall be vested in the tiller."

Some notable trends are:

(a) Increase in size of land holdings with operation units embracing two or more farms.

(b) Growing number of tenants pushed down the agricultural ladder or off the land entirely by mechanization.

(c) Increase in average age of farm operators and a smaller proportion of young men entering farming.

Offsetting these trends somewhat, however, is the fact that absentee ownership by finance organizations has been decreasing since 1935.

(2) Are we moving unwittingly toward a closed-shop type of farming and land ownership?

Records of farm land transactions reveal an abnormally large number of purchases by urban investors and by farmers wishing to enlarge their already adequate holdings. Teachers of vocational agriculture point out lessening opportunity for a young man to climb the agricultural ladder, unless his parents or near relatives have land.

(3) What is the future for disadvantaged families in American agriculture?

In normal times we have a third of a million sharecroppers living in a state of semifeudalism and more than a third of a million migratory laborers roaming the highways with their families in search of seasonal crop work. We have some unfinished business of our own in land reform. Merely to focus our attention upon larger and better-equipped family farms as the American ideal is to ignore this important segment of our population whose plight is the more tragic since it occurs in the midst of abundant land resources.

The Church's Opportunity

The Land Tenure Committee has done much through community studies, regional land tenure conferences, and publications to direct the attention of churchmen and social scientists toward improved land tenure as a basis for better rural family living and enriched church and community life. The religious and moral implications of land use are more widely recognized than before. The Church has a unique opportunity and obligation to become the conscience of the Western world for land reform.

The Bible was our first book dealing with land tenure and it would seem that each theological seminary preparing men for the rural ministry should offer instruction in ethics of land tenancy and ownership. Our land use is to a large degree still geared to exploitive forms of rural development. While we have developed limited but rich experience in family-type farming and in bridging the land ownership gap between generations, we have yet to face squarely the nonmaterial values inherent in land use and the moral aspects of land renting, size of holding, and contracts of sale.

Each church community might well have a working committee for helping to create improved family-land relationships. Such a committee should serve community-wide interests in the establishment of families on land, rather than one church denomination only.

With our growing awareness of the interdependence of the world community, with rapid increase of the world population, and with the rising legitimate demands for justice from more and more people, improved land tenure relationships must now become a matter of major Christian concern and action. The prophet Micah gave us our clue when he said, "What does the Lord require of thee but to do justly and love mercy."

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